

# Why going to a Kraftwerk Concert Felt Weird

*Shôn Ellerton, December 13, 2023*

*Being a fan of Kraftwerk and electronica in general, I didn't quite know what to expect at a live Kraftwerk concert.*



Whilst browsing on Facebook earlier this year, I came across an upcoming music event to be hosted in Adelaide, where I reside. Seems that Kraftwerk are coming to town!

Excitedly, I bought tickets for the family having been reliably informed how good the light and sound show was going to be. It was also 'kid-friendly' meaning that you're not going to get a throng of dazed and confused, hyped up, crowd of nutters pushing and shoving every which way as you might experience going to a heavy metal concert.

But what would I expect at a live 'concert' of an electronic band whose original count of members had dwindled from four to one, the other three having died? Sure. Many popular groups and bands from the mid to late twentieth century are still alive and kicking, albeit barely, doing tours and whatnot. Band members are replaced with new recruits in the hope that the original flavour of the band will still resemble much as it once was. But for me, it often fails insofar that the original sound is irreparably lost in favour of an ersatz version of what the band once was.

To take one of the most famous groups like Pink Floyd, a band which I enjoy listening to from my youth to today, there is no doubt that the sound had altered through the passage of time along with the gradual loss of key members, who created, to my ears, sonic delights founded from experimentation, wizardry, creativity and artistry. After *The Wall* was released back in 1979, the sound of the

band morphed into that typical soft humdrum style of classic rock music without the energy of that once-raw sound. The same could be said for many other rock groups of the day. They have merely turned away from the exciting but risky business of experimentation and wizardry to the safety of churning out songs based on tried and tested templates.

As for Kraftwerk and for countless other electronica groups out there, old and new, what can one expect in a live concert anyway? Doubtful one would see the real live playing of musical instruments but rather hear pre-recorded music with the artists miming to it. Let's be realistic. In the world of electronica, you are not going to be wowed by the artists playing their instruments in a live setting. It's just not possible. Creating electronica is an art form which takes place beforehand much like a painter creates his or her masterpiece. Anyone suggesting that this is an easy task is probably not familiar at all with electronica. Once that music is polished and then recorded, the artwork is complete.

Electronica, including dance, does have its live component in the form of DJs, who take the artistry to another level. They have the ability to bring electronic and dance music to the masses making it exciting and danceable. As with the artists of electronica, DJs spend most of their time preparing in advance of the performance, but their skill in performing in front of a live audience must be good enough to warrant return business. Good DJs have vast knowledge of the music they specialise in and their skills really shine when they can layer and meld almost any track seamlessly as if it was meant to be built that way. Many DJs have become so successful that they have become the stars rather than the original artists behind the music. Indeed, many of these original artists simply would not have survived without these DJs at play. And, of course, the reverse is true. It works in symbiosis.

Rucking up to the Kraftwerk concert, the first thing that struck me was the clientele. It was hosted in Adelaide's Entertainment Centre, which is, by no means, a grand space for a concert. There isn't much else in Adelaide, perhaps, apart from the Festival Theatre. People of all sorts came but, no doubt, much of the population was of a decidedly mature age, many of them being pot-bellied and, frankly, not very well looked after. There were some younger ones there who probably came on grounds of curiosity or coerced by their parents into coming, as I did with my son. Younger people who are into the world of electronica would most have certainly heard of Kraftwerk, a group considered by most electronica aficionados as being one of the godfathers of the genre. Kraftwerk was, indeed,

revolutionary and fresh in the sound of electronica from the late 60s to the mid-80s, but after that, there was nothing particularly interesting save for the *Tour de France* album and the one track, *Expo 2000*. Like many other electronic groups including *The Orb*, *Orbital*, and *Future Sound of London*, the group simply milked the cow by churned out endless remixes.

After a couple of wines in the foyer, we proceeded to our seats. The seats were comfortable and the view was good but alas, the soundstage was nothing as grand as I expected. In typical Kraftwerk fashion, the only objects on stage were four keyboards on pedestals lined up neatly in a row with true German precision. Whether the keyboards were plugged in, or if indeed, real, was another matter. Behind was a big screen and that was about it.

The lights dimmed and the Kraftwerk crew came on to the stage. Sitting in the back, we couldn't see them properly but they were certainly visible with their lit-up neon-like jackets not unlike that Dynamo guy in that old Arnie action movie, *The Running Man*. They could have been anyone taken off the street as they just stood there for the entire two-hour performance with hardly any movement at all. I wasn't too concerned as I was rather expecting a somewhat inanimate display by the artists. After all, as mentioned earlier, you simply cannot perform this kind of music live.

I was expecting, however, much more in the way of lights and effects. I wanted holograms, lasers, smoke, dry ice, and all that other wonderful stuff to give the air an electric feel. But there was none of that save for some basic strobes during the last piece of the evening, *The Robots*. The imagery chosen for the big monitor behind the nearly motionless artists was quite good though. Images of yesteryear for early 20<sup>th</sup> century models to accompany *The Model*, cool wavelike imagery for *Radioactivity*, lots of numbers and binary code stuff for *Numbers*, and of course, some very cool animation for *Trans Europe Express* using a very strong [\*Streamline Moderne\*](#) style of motif, which for the unfamiliar, is a stark, sleek, geometrical style based on art deco but without all the embellishments. Such examples include the famous [\*Normandie\*](#) ocean liner and of those zeppelin airships as depicted by posters advertising them during the early 30s. The repertoire of Kraftwerk had always commemorated the technical advances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a time where the advances of transportation, space exploration, and the advent of the computer age were wonders far removed from today's terribly boring age of social media, The Cloud, and the ever committing requirements to

keep humans disinterested from exploring space or to own big gas-guzzling classic cars. At least we have Elon Musk to break that boredom!

The sound of the concert was good, although it started a bit on the quiet side. As the performance went on, it gradually built up in volume. The earlier works of Kraftwerk were somewhat sonically-challenged not having a wide dynamic audio range as they tend to be today. Bass lines were weak and the spatial imagery was poor, but the remixes remedied all that without losing the feel of the original score. Despite the lack of 3-D effects including the use of lasers, a bit of smoke and other visually-engaging features, it was, overall, a good experience. However, it felt very odd sitting there, cinema-style with assigned seating, watching the screen and the motionless artists whilst listening to synth electronic melodies with their pumping basslines, most of which would go down quite well on the dancefloor. It also felt peculiar to clap after each score full well knowing that all the stuff was pre-recorded with little or no interaction by the aforementioned artists behind their 'keyboards'. It wasn't wholly unlike the absurd practice of clapping after watching a film in a cinema.

I've always loved Kraftwerk and applaud the way they composed their material together. I always appreciated how each album they produced was focussed on a specific theme related to technology and how they applied that sonically to match. Much of that style of listening is lost with today's generation as we tend not to focus on listening to complete albums but selected songs from streaming services. As for attending Kraftwerk or a similar genre of music in a so-called live setting, I may think twice in future. That night's performance would have been an awesome experience if situated in a large nightclub with a floor for patrons to dance on along with chill out areas for people to sit and enjoy a cocktail. Perhaps even a suggestion might go down well to offer drinks and cocktails as inspired by the age of Streamline Moderne. I'd go for that!